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Safety Article

Who dies When Teen Drivers Crash?

Majority Killed in Teen Driver Crashes are passengers, Other Drivers

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Contact: Mantill Williams

Email: mjwilliams@nationalaaa.com

Phone: 202-942-2082

AAA to Focus Advocacy Efforts on Strengthening Teen Driver Safety Laws

The majority of people killed in teen driver crashes are people other than the teen driver themselves, according to a recent analysis of ten years of crash data by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

The new analysis shows that young novice drivers comprise slightly more than one-third of all the fatalities in crashes in which they are involved, whereas nearly two-thirds of those killed are other vehicle users and pedestrians. AAA says these statistics provide new urgency to its advocacy efforts to strengthen graduated licensing laws (GDL).

“It’s clear from this analysis that we have to approach the issue of teen driver safety in a different way,” said Robert L. Darbelnet, AAA President and CEO. “We need to focus on the effects teen driver crashes have on others in addition to the teen drivers themselves.”

This analysis shows that between 1995 and 2004 crashes involving 15-, 16- and 17-year old drivers claimed the lives of 30,917 people nationwide, of which 11,177 (36.2%) were the teen drivers themselves. The remaining 19,740 (63.6%) included 9,847 passengers of the 15-17-year old drivers, 7,477 occupants of other vehicles operated by drivers at least 18 years of age, 2,323 non-motorists and 93 others/unknowns.

“The tragedy of teen driver crashes goes well beyond the teen driver and their teen passengers,” said Darbelnet. “These crashes also kill pedestrians and people in other vehicles - that’s somebody’s mother, child, brother, or grandmother.”

The analysis also shows that while 12,413 of these fatalities occurred in single vehicle crashes involving only the vehicle operated by the teenage driver, the remaining 18,504 deaths occurred in crashes involving multiple-vehicles and/or non-motorists. Of these, more than half of the fatalities were either occupants of vehicles driven by adult drivers (7,477, 40.4%) or non-motorists (2, 323, 12.6%). In addition, nearly four out of five of

these drivers of other vehicles, their passengers, and non-motorist deaths were 21 years of age or older.

“We view this report as a wake-up call for everyone who uses our roadways to get involved by contacting their state legislators, urging them to strengthen their state GDL law,” said Darbelnet.

While AAA says comprehensive GDL laws are the best way to increase safety for all road users, the organization also says parents play a critically important role in enforcing passenger restrictions.

“Regardless of what the state law says, parents should not allow their teens to ride with other teen drivers, nor should they be allowed to transport other teens in the first year of driving,” said Darbelnet. “It’s tempting to be lured by the convenience of having other options for getting kids to and from school and other activities, but the risks are just too great.”

Recognizing that parents may feel awkward about enforcing rules other parents are not enforcing, AAA unveiled a new parent discussion guide to help parents work as a team to ensure teens gain driving experience in the safest driving environment possible during that first year.

“Parents who understand the risks recognize that it is important to keep teens from riding with other teens, even if it means playing ‘chauffer’ for a year or more,” said Darbelnet.

In addition, the AAA Foundation released an updated version of one of their popular educational tools for teen drivers, Driver-ZED- an interactive, risk-management DVD. For more information on this program, other teen driver safety tools and how to get involved by contacting your legislator go to www.aaa.com/publicaffairs.

With car crashes being the leading cause of death for teenagers, AAA set an ambitious goal in 1997 to pass GDL laws in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The goal was achieved when both Wyoming and Montana enacted laws in 2005. These legislative efforts have helped save lives by requiring teens to get more supervised behind-the-wheel driving experience and phased-in driving privileges restricted to low-risk times and situations, until a full license is granted. However, not all GDL laws are comprehensive. AAA Clubs are now focused on strengthening the state GDL laws by adding or improving passenger and nighttime restrictions, and fine tuning other components to make the laws more comprehensive.

The teen driver crash data analysis was conducted by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. The Foundation analyzed data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) from 1995 to 2004, examining fatal crashes involving 15-, 16- and 17-year-old drivers of passenger vehicles.

